

Finding
FATHER
CHRISTMAS

↑
↓

ENGAGING
Father
Christmas

Books by Robin Jones Gunn

Finding Father Christmas
Engaging Father Christmas
Kissing Father Christmas

Available from FaithWords wherever books are sold.

Finding
FATHER
CHRISTMAS



ENGAGING
Father
Christmas

TWO NOVELS IN ONE BOOK

ROBIN JONES GUNN



New York Boston Nashville

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Finding Father Christmas copyright © 2007 by Robin's Nest Productions, Inc.

Engaging Father Christmas copyright © 2008 by Robin's Nest Productions, Inc.

Preview of *Kissing Father Christmas* copyright © 2016 by Robin's Nest Productions, Inc.

Cover design by JuLee Brand

Cover Illustration by Mark Stutzman

Cover copyright © 2016 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

FaithWords

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

www.faithwords.com

twitter.com/faithwords

First Omnibus Edition: September 2016

FaithWords is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The FaithWords name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to www.hachettespeakersbureau.com or call (866) 376-6591.

Additional *Finding Father Christmas* credits:

With thanks to R. W. Crump and Louisiana State University Press for their work on *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, volume one of which includes the text of "A Christmas Carol," here quoted as "My Gift."

Print book interior design by Fearn Cutler de Vicq.

Additional *Engaging Father Christmas* credits:

Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures are taken from the HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Print book interior design by Fearn Cutler de Vicq.

LCCN: 2016946164

ISBNs: 978-1-4555-6594-8 (trade paperback), 978-1-4555-6595-5 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

RRD-C

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Rachel and Stephanie, you made our research jaunt to
London an absolute delight.*

*Trish and Libby, you saw the Hallmark Christmas movie story bidden on
these pages and worked tirelessly for five years to make
it happen. My heart is deeply grateful.*

Janet, you are the best agent in the world. Peace and grace reside in you.



Acknowledgments

A round of warm thank-yous to my British friends: Penny and Anna Culliford, who showed me the Kent countryside and introduced me to English pudding; Marion Stroud, who opened to me her heart and home and gave valuable feedback for the story; and Heather Thomas, who recognized the Christina Rossetti Christmas poem when she read the first draft of this manuscript—and then sang the poem for me as she did when she was a child. A forever thank you to my husband, Ross Gunn III; to my agent, Janet Kobobel Grant; and to my blue-beach-chair sister, Anne deGraaf. Each of you infused this little book with your encouragement and support. Many thanks to Rolf Zettersten, Chip MacGregor, Christina Boys, and Becky Hughes.



Finding
FATHER
CHRISTMAS



ENGAGING
Father
Christmas



*Finding
Father
Christmas*





“Come in! Come in, and know me better.”

—Spirit of Christmas Present
from *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens







Chapter One

A string of merry silver bells jumped and jingled as the north wind shook the evergreen wreath on the heavy wooden door. Overhead a painted shingle swung from two metal arms, declaring this place of business to be the Tea Cosy.

As I peered inside through the thick-paned window, I could see a cheerful amber fire in the hearth. Tables were set for two with china cups neatly positioned on crimson tablecloths. Swags of green foliage trimmed the mantel. Dotted across the room, on the tables and on shelves, were a dozen red votive candles. Each tiny light flickered, sending out promises of warmth and cheer, inviting me to step inside.

Another more determined gust made a swoop down the lane, this time taking my breath with it into the darkness of the December night.

This trip was a mistake. A huge mistake. What was I thinking?

I knew the answer as it rode off on the mocking wind. The answer was, I wasn't thinking. I was feeling.

Pure emotion last Friday nudged me to book the round-trip ticket to London. Blind passion convinced me that the answer to my twenty-year question would be revealed once I reached the Carlton Photography Studio on Bexley Lane.

Robin Jones Gunn

Sadly, I was wrong. I had come all this way only to hit a dead end.

I took another look inside the teahouse and told myself to keep walking, back to the train station, back to the hotel in London where I had left my luggage. This exercise in futility was over. I might as well change my ticket and fly back to San Francisco in the morning.

My chilled and weary feet refused to obey. They wanted to go inside and be warmed by the fire. I couldn't deny that my poor legs did deserve a little kindness after all I had put them through when I folded them into the last seat in coach class. The middle seat, by the lavatories, in the row that didn't recline. A cup of tea at a moment like this might be the only blissful memory I would take with me from this fiasco.

Reaching for the oddly shaped metal latch on the door, I stepped inside and set the silver bells jingling again.

"Come in, come in, and know me better, friend!" The unexpected greeting came from a kilt-wearing man with a valiant face. His profoundly wide sideburns had the look of white lamb's wool and softened the resoluteness in his jaw. "Have you brought the snowflakes with you, then?"

"The snowflakes?" I repeated.

"Aye! The snowflakes. It's cold enough for snow, wouldn't you say?"

I nodded my reluctant agreement, feeling my nose and cheeks going rosy in the small room's warmth. I assumed the gentleman who opened the door was the proprietor. Looking around, I asked, "Is it okay if I take the table by the fire? All I'd like is a cup of tea."

Finding Father Christmas

"I don't see why not. Katharine!" He waited for a response and then tried again. "Katharine!"

No answer came.

"She must have gone upstairs. She'll be back around." His grin was engaging, his eyes clear. "I would put the kettle on for you myself, if it weren't for the case of my being on my way out at the moment."

"That's okay. I don't mind waiting."

"Of course you don't mind waiting. A young woman such as yourself has the time to wait, do you not? Whereas, for a person such as myself . . ." He leaned closer and with a wink confided in me, "I'm Christmas Present, you see. I can't wait."

What sort of "present" he supposed himself to be and to whom, I wasn't sure.

With a nod, the man drew back the heavy door and strode into the frosty air.

From a set of narrow stairs a striking woman descended. She looked as surprised at my appearance as I was at hers. She wore a stunning red, floor-length evening dress. Around her neck hung a sparkling silver necklace, and dangling from under her dark hair were matching silver earrings. She stood tall with careful posture and tilted her head, waiting for me to speak.

"I wasn't sure if you were still open."

"Yes, on an ordinary day we would be open for another little while, until five thirty. . . ." Her voice drifted off.

"Five thirty," I repeated, checking my watch. The time read 11:58. The exact time I'd adjusted it to when I had deplaned at Heathrow Airport late that morning. I tapped on the face of my watch as if that would make it run again. "I can see you

Robin Jones Gunn

have plans for the evening and that you're ready to close. I'll just—"

"Che-che-che." The sound that came from her was the sort used to call a squirrel to come find the peanuts left for it on a park bench. It wasn't a real word from a real language, but I understood the meaning. I was being invited to stay and not to run off.

"Take any seat you want. Would you like a scone with your tea or perhaps some rum cake?"

"Just the tea, thank you."

I moved toward the fire and realized that a scone sounded pretty good. I hadn't eaten anything since the undercooked breakfast omelet served on the plane.

"Actually, I would like to have a scone, too. If it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all."

Her smile was tender, motherly. I guessed her to be in her midfifties or maybe older. She turned without any corners or edges to her motions. I soon heard the clinking of dishes as she prepared the necessary items in the kitchen.

Making my way to a steady looking table by the fire, I tried to tuck my large shoulder bag under the spindle leg of the chair. The stones along the front of the hearth were permanently blackened from what I imagined to be centuries of soot. The charm of the room increased as I sat down and felt the coziness of the close quarters. This was a place of serenity. A place where trust between friends had been established and kept for many years.

A sense of safety and comfort called to the deepest part of

Finding Father Christmas

my spirit and begged me to set free a fountain of tears. But I capped them off. It was that same wellspring of emotion that had instigated this journey.

Settling back, I blinked and let the steady heat from the fire warm me. Katharine returned carrying a tray. The steaming pot of tea took center stage, wearing a chintzquilted dressing gown, gathered at the top.

Even the china teapots are treated to coziness here.

"I've warmed two scones for you, and this, of course, is your clotted cream. I've given you raspberry jam, but if you would prefer strawberry, I do have some."

"No, this is fine. Perfect. Thank you."

Katharine lifted the festooned teapot and poured the steaming liquid into my waiting china cup. I felt for a moment as if I had stumbled into an odd sort of parallel world to Narnia.

As a young child I had read C. S. Lewis's Narnia tales a number of times. In the many hours alone, I had played out the fairy tales in my imagination, pretending I was Lucy, stepping through the wardrobe into an imaginary world.

Here, in the real country of Narnia's author, I considered how similar my surroundings were to Lewis's descriptions of that imaginary world. A warming fire welcomed me in from the cold. But instead of a fawn inviting me to tea, it had been a kilted clansman. Instead of Mrs. Beaver pouring a cup of cheer for me by the fire, it was a tall, unhurried woman in a red evening gown.

An unwelcome thought came and settled on me as clearly as if I had heard a whisper. *Miranda, how much longer will you believe it is "always winter and never Christmas"?*

A decorative lantern graphic is positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping the text. It has a classic, ornate design with a glass globe and a metal frame. The lantern is rendered in a light, semi-transparent style, allowing the text behind it to be visible.

Chapter Two

I ignored the mysterious whisper that had caught me off guard and quickly took a sip of the steaming tea.

"Very nice." I nodded to Katharine, who still stood near the table as if waiting for my next request.

"Did you come to Carlton Heath for Christmas?" Her voice was soothing.

"Yes. Well, no. Not for Christmas. I'm just . . . I was trying to find . . . I'm . . ."

"Just visiting?" she finished for me.

"Yes. Just visiting."

Now that I was inside the teahouse, I felt much less intimidated by the reason for my journey than I had when I stood alone outside. With my guard down, I looked up at gentle Katharine and said, "May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"I was trying to find the Carlton Heath Photography Studio on Bexley Lane. I walked up and down both sides of the street as far as I could go, but I didn't find it. Do you know where it is?"

She shook her head.

"I have the name printed on the back of a photo." I lifted from my big purse the plastic sandwich bag in which I'd carefully

Finding Father Christmas

placed the photograph. I handled it cautiously. That single photo was the precious piece of evidence that had driven me here to Carlton Heath on a whim after a very long time of indecision. Removing the wallet-sized photo from the clear bag, I turned the picture over, pointing to the name stamped on the paper: "Carlton Photography Studio, Bexley Lane, Carlton Heath." I handed the photo to Katharine carefully.

She looked mystified. "This is the only Bexley Lane in Carlton Heath. I don't know of any photography studios along the road. Perhaps they went out of business."

"That's what I was afraid of."

As she tilted her head, her silver earrings caught the light from the fire. "If they were in business here, I'm sure someone around town would know about them. I've only lived in Carlton Heath for a few years, so I'm not too helpful when it comes to the comings and goings of the past. My husband would know."

She paused before turning over the photo and asked, "Would you mind if I had a look at the picture?"

"No. Please do. And tell me if you recognize either of the people in the photo. I was hoping someone at the photo studio might have an idea who they were."

The image she gazed at was ingrained in my memory. I had stared at the photo so long in my adolescent years that every detail of the two people was familiar, including the nasty, faded green shade of the sweater the little boy was wearing. He appeared to be four or maybe five years old and was seated precariously on the lap of a man who was dressed in an odd-looking Santa suit. The boy was wailing, mouth open wide, head tipped back. His short arms were rigid at his side as if he

Robin Jones Gunn

was being a brave little soldier about the situation, but he wasn't too afraid to let his voice be heard.

I knew every line in the face of the man who was playing Santa Claus. His outfit resembled a Bohemian-style dressing robe rather than the usual red velvet Santa suit. Nor was his red cap typical Santa attire. Instead, it rose to a point before tipping to the side, and it was trimmed sparingly in black piping rather than the customary wide band of white fleece.

The whiteness in the photo was found in the man's long, flowing beard and in his thick eyebrows. He seemed to be trying to keep a straight face, yet his eyes merrily revealed his mirth as well as his age. The exposed laugh lines around his clear blue eyes put him past fifty, by my estimation. His large left hand, visible around the boy's middle, displayed a gold ring on the third finger and the edge of a gold watchband around his wrist.

"What a charmer," Katharine said as she looked at the photo. A smile grew on her lips.

I nodded. The photo couldn't help but bring a smile to any viewer.

"Curious," she said, tilting her head. "I believe I've seen this picture before."

My heart rose to meet the sip of hot tea I had just swallowed. I put the cup back in the saucer, not completely on target, and kept my eyes fixed on Katharine. "You have? Here in Carlton Heath? Do you remember where?"

"No. I'm not sure. I do remember the photo was in a frame, though. An ornate frame. It was lovely. I can't quite remember where I saw it."

Finding Father Christmas

I waited eagerly as she stared again at the photo and pursed her lips.

After a full minute she said, "I have a suggestion."

"Yes?"

"I'm not able to place where I've seen this photo, but someone in town might know. Others who have lived here longer than I have would also know about the photography studio. One of them might possibly recognize the man or the boy in the photo, as well."

"Whom should I ask?"

"Several residents, actually. My husband, for one. He and the others will be at the performance this evening. Why don't you come with me?"

"The performance?" I repeated.

"Yes, the Dickens play, *A Christmas Carol*. I should warn you, though, it's a rather wry version. But the resident thespians have kept up the tradition for more than forty years. Mind you, the play is an abbreviation of the original, and the adaptation of the characters is, shall we say, loose. But it is wonderfully entertaining."

I bit my lower lip and felt a sickening knot tighten in my stomach.

"Would you like to come, then?" Katharine asked. "As my guest, of course."

"I . . . I don't know."

"Ah." She handed back the photograph. "Perhaps you have plans. It is Christmas Eve, after all."

"No. I mean, yes. I do have plans. I need to get back to London. To my hotel room."

Robin Jones Gunn

"Che-che-che. London is close enough. You won't have difficulty returning later in the evening."

I scrambled for an appropriate response while Katharine stood tall and graciously patient before me, hands folded across the front of her lovely evening dress, waiting for my reply.

"I don't have the right kind of outfit with me for the theater," I said.

She smiled. "I don't think anyone in attendance tonight would even lovingly refer to what you'll see as 'theater.' What you're wearing now is entirely appropriate. I'm dressed as I am because I've a part in the production. In the concessions, actually."

I stalled, looking down at the untouched scones on the china plate.

"Well, then," she said, easing my silence. "Perhaps I'll leave you to enjoy your tea, and you can take a moment to consider the invitation. If I can bring you anything, do ask."

As she turned to leave, I unexpectedly blurted out the reason for my indecision. "I don't go to plays."

Katharine's expression appeared unaffected by my strange declaration.

I added a little more information. "I stopped going to plays a long time ago and . . ."

The resolve that had fueled my boycott when I was nine years old now waned in the light of this room where all my logic and defenses seemed unnecessary considering my hostess's elegant grace.

". . . I don't go to plays," I finished lamely.

She stood still, a few feet away. After a pause, she spoke.

Finding Father Christmas

"What I have always loved about decisions is that you can make a new one whenever you like."

Then she slid behind the curtain that cordoned off the kitchen area from the half a dozen open tables covered in their crimson cloths and dotted with flickering votives. I sat alone by the comforting fire.

Yet I didn't feel entirely alone. A select convoy of early childhood memories gathered in the empty seat across from me. They rose to their full height, leaned closer, and stared at me, waiting to hear whether they still held power over my decisions.